Balochistan releases Rs2.25bn for health card programme

Scheme faced disruption after Rs5 billion dues accumulated with insurance company

By Saleem Shahid

QUETTA: The provincial finance department has released Rs2.25 billion for the Balochistan Health Card Programme, aimed at providing free medical treatment to poor and deserving patients at leading hospitals across all four provinces.

The Balochistan Health Card Programme, launched by the provincial government last year to ensure free healthcare for underprivileged families, had recently faced a serious setback after outstanding dues of Rs5bn accumulated with State Life Insurance. As a result, private hospitals in Karachi suspended treatment of Balochistan Health Card patients under the programme.

Following the publication in newspapers of the report, Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti took notice of the non-release of funds and issued immediate directives for the release of the required amount. In compliance with the chief minister's orders, the finance department has now released Rs2.25bn for the programme.

However, officials said that despite the latest release, the Balochistan Health Card Programme still carries outstanding liabilities of Rs2.75bn payable to State Life Insurance.

Sources in the provincial health department expressed hope that, under the directives of Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti, the finance department would soon release the remaining funds to ensure there is no disruption in medical treatment for poor patients.

They said the timely release of funds is essential to restore and sustain uninterrupted healthcare services under the Balochistan Health Card Programme.

Pakistan engaged with US on visa curbs, Iran tariff

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Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

"We are willing to play such a role now," the spokesman said while referring to the latest phase of tensions.

Asked about Pakistan's policy on the use of its airspace or territory against Iran, the spokesman said it remained unchanged. "Policy remains the same. Ditto," he said.

Mr Andrabi said instability in neighbouring Iran did not suit Pakistan, underscoring Islamabad's interest in a stable and peaceful Iran as protests there show signs of easing after weeks of unrest.

He stressed that calm and stability in Iran were directly linked to Pakistan's own interests. "A stable and peaceful Iran, free from domestic unrest or political upheaval, is in Pakistan's interest," the spokesman maintained.

Sharing Pakistan's position on the issue, he said, it is understood that the recent protests in Iran were driven by economic difficulties faced by ordinary citizens, which had been aggravated by US and Western sanctions.

"We understand that the recent protests in Iran were triggered by economic difficulties faced by ordinary citizens, which have been further exacerbated by international sanctions," he said.

The comments were significant as the Foreign Office explicitly identified economic grievances linked to sanctions as the root cause of the protests. Last week, the spokesman had implicitly rejected any external interference in Iran's internal affairs.

The spokesman welcomed measures announced by Tehran to ease economic pressures, expressing hope they would help reduce public hardship. Pakistan, he said, extended its "best wishes for the success of these efforts" aimed at supporting traders and the general public.

"Pakistan remains confident that the Iranian nation will overcome these challenges and emerge stronger," he added.

Referring to Iran's long history and social resilience, Mr Andrabi said Pakistan had "full confidence in the wisdom of the Iranian people and leadership", rooted in their culture, civilisation and experience, to address the challenges confronting the country.

Defence pact with Turkiye, Saudi awaits final approval

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week that Turkiye was seeking to join the Pak-Saudi defence pact signed in September 2025.

The report said Turkiye viewed the pact "as a way of strengthening security and deterrents when there are questions over the reliability of the US, which has strong military ties with all three countries, and President Donald Trump's commitment" to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato).

Saudi Arabia brings financial clout, Pakistan has nuclear capability, ballistic missiles and manpower, while Turkiye has the military experience and has developed a defence industry, *Bloomberg* quoted Nihat Ali Ozcan, a strategist with Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, as saying.

Asked separately about such reports, Mr Harraj told *BBC Urdu* that Turkiye, China, Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan were "close friendly countries" of Pakistan, with strong strategic ties.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman signed a "Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement" in Riyadh last year, pledging that any attack on either country would be treated as an act of aggression against both.—Reuters/ Monitoring Desk

Cop, female teacher gunned down

By Ali Jan Mangi

DERA MURAD JAMALI: A policeman was gunned down by unknown men in Dera Murad Jamali, while in another incident a female teacher was shot dead in Sibi on Thursday.

According to police, head Constable Ali Gohar was on his way to a police station when the unidentified men shot at him near a school, killing him on the spot.

Police shifted the body to a nearby hospital and later handed it over to Gohar's family after medico-legal formalities.

The funeral prayers of the martyred policeman were offered at the Police Lines. A large number of police personnel and local residents attended it.

In the other incident, a female teacher was shot dead while she was on way to her school. "She received multiple bullet injuries and died immediately," a police spokesperson said.

The teacher was a close relative of Peoples Party leaders Sardar Noor Ahmed Bangulzai and Akram Bangulzai, and sister of Assistant Commissioner Malik Bahadur Bangulzai. She was buried at Sibi's Parak graveyard.

Taliban leader's speech lays bare divide

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switched the internet back on. According to one expert, this was nothing short of rebellion for a group that doesn't brook dissent amongst its echelons.

Consolidation in Kandahar

Although Akhundzada was the lone power centre by the time the Taliban recaptured Kabul in 2021, his earlier lack of battlefield experience meant that his deputies — Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Omar's son Yaqoob — shepherded him through the period when the group was still consolidating its power.

But once they came into power, the two powerful men were designated as mere ministers, and even a figure like Mullah Baradar — the co-founder of the Taliban movement — found himself handed the title of deputy PM.

Akhundzada — having shunned the capital in favour of remaining in Kandahar, a base of power for the Taliban — began surrounding himself with trusted ideologues and hardliners, the *BBC* noted.

The supreme leader, who had started out as a judge in the Taliban's Sharia courts of the 1990s, quickly began announcing edicts without consultation with Kabul, and with little regard for public promises made before they took power, on issues like allowing girls access to education.

Getting a meeting with him has also become increasingly difficult, as Akhundzada is said to be extremely reclusive. Photographing or filming him is forbidden and only two photos of him are known to exist. Reports suggest Akhundzada issues direct orders all the way down to local police units — bypassing ministers in Kabul.

An observer argued that the "real authority has been transferred to Kandahar" but Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid denied this impression.

"All the ministers have their power in their ministerial framework, undertaking daily works and making decisions — all the powers are delegated to them and they carry out their duties," he told the *BBC*.

In a subsequent tweet, he termed the *BBC* report "unfounded". He did, however, implicitly confirm the existence of the audio recording cited as the basis for the report, only taking issue with its interpretation.

"Statements by the leadership emphasising the importance of unity and cohesion, or minor matters in which opinions may differ, should never be interpreted as disagreement… there is no fear of discord," Mujahid wrote on his X account.

Kabul left fretting

On the other side, the Kabul group — unofficially led by Mullah Baradar — wants to see an Afghanistan which moves towards the model of a Gulf state.

They are concerned about the concentration of power in Kandahar, the nature and enforcement of virtue laws, how the Taliban should engage with the international community and women's education and employment.

But rather than being 'moderate', this faction is seen as being more pragmatic. Mullah Yaqoob is becoming increasingly popular with young Taliban members and some ordinary Afghans, while Sirajuddin Haqqani has managed to rebrand himself to near-mythical status among supporters.

But despite all this, analysts and insiders repeatedly told the *BBC* that openly moving against supreme leader Akhundzada was unlikely.

TTAP forms bodies

ISLAMABAD: The opposition alliance Tehreek Tahafuz Ayeen-i-Pakistan (TTAP) announced on Thursday the formation of international, national, and provincial committees to orchestrate country-wide strikes on February 8 condemning alleged rigging in the 2024 general election.

According to a statement issued by the TTAP, the nationwide strike will be observed to protest the "violation of public mandate and vote theft" in the elections, adding that the move has the backing of incarcerated former prime minister Imran Khan.

To facilitate the protest, TTAP's central coordination committee will be responsible for overall supervision, guidance and coordination of the strike.

The committee will oversee strike-related activities across the country, provide necessary guidance and ensure responses to any situation.

It will remain in direct contact with all provincial and regional committees to continuously review preparations, progress and outcomes.—Ikram Junaidi

Temperatures to plunge as wet spell starts

Continued from Page 1

January 19, with occasional gaps. From January 18 to 20, Murree and Galiyat will also receive light rain and snow.

From January 20 to 23, widespread rain is expected in Gilgit Baltistan, Kashmir, Murree, Galiyat, Islamabad, Potohar, Sargodha, Gujranwala, Lahore, Sahiwal, Multan, Faisalabad, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur. Peshawar, Hazara, Malakand, Mardan, Kohat, Bannu, and Dera Ismail Khan will also receive rain with occasional gaps.

Meanwhile, heavy snowfall is expected in Chitral, Dir, Swat, Kalam, Shangla, Kohistan, Battagram, Mansehra, Abbottabad, Murree, Galiyat, Neelum Valley, Bagh, Haveli, and Rawalakot from January 20 (night) to 23, with occasional gaps.

On January 21 and 22, Quetta, Ziarat, Chaman, Pishin, Qilla Abdullah, Qilla Saifullah, Noushki, Harnai, Zhob, Kalat, Barkhan, Sibi, Loralai, Musakhel, Turbat, Gwadar, Lasbela, Kech, Awaran, Chaghi, Panjgur, Khuzdar, Washuk, and Kharan in Balochistan will receive rainfall.

Similarly, moderate to heavy snowfall in Quetta, Ziarat, Chaman, Pishin, Qilla Abdullah, Qilla Saifullah, Harnai, and Zhob is also expected during this period.

Sindh's Karachi, Hyderabad, Dadu, Jacobabad, Naushero Feroz, Kashmore, Larkana, Shaheed Benazirabad, Mirpurkhas, and Ghotki will experience rain with occasional gaps on Jan 22 and 23.

The authorities warned that the heavy snowfall could cause road closures and slippery conditions in the mountainous areas from January 21 (night) to 23.

It stated that there was a possibility of landslides and avalanches in the hilly areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Kashmir, advising tourists to remain cautious.

"Fog condition is likely to diminish in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and upper Sindh during the wet spell. Daytime temperatures are likely to drop significantly during the period," it stated.

'Strong cold wave'

On the other hand, the National Emergencies Operations Centre (NEOC) of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) issued a weather alert regarding a strong cold wave expected to affect Gilgit-Baltistan, upper Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir over the coming days.

It advised the public to avoid non-essential travel to high-altitude and snowfall-prone areas and to ensure the use of snow chains where travel is unavoidable.

Citizens are urged to make adequate arrangements for heating, warm clothing, and shelter, with particular attention to protecting vulnerable populations, it added.

Local communities are advised to remain vigilant and strictly follow advisories issued by relevant local authorities. The NDMA directed all provincial and district authorities to remain on high alert and ensure preparedness for snow clearance operations, emergency response, and timely restoration of essential services, including electricity and communications.

Punjab issues alert

The Punjab Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) also issued an alert for rain in most districts of the province.

PDMA Director General Irfan Ali Kathia stated that all arrangements should be completed in advance and staff in emergency control rooms should remain on alert 24 hours a day.

He said that disaster response teams of Rescue 1122 should also be kept on high alert, and citizens should avoid unnecessary travel in bad weather conditions.

He advised the tourists in Murree to take precautionary measures and follow the instructions.

He said that facilitation centres were established at various places in Murree for the convenience of tourists, and citizens should avoid speeding and sudden braking, use fog lights while travelling, and follow the precautionary measures issued by the public.

Imran Gabol in Lahore also contributed to this report

CM takes notice of gas outages in Balochistan

By Our Staff Correspondent

QUETTA: Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfaraz Bugti expressed serious concern and anger on Thursday over gas shortages in Quetta and other towns amid severe cold weather, saying the situation was causing great hardship to the people.

Presiding over a meeting attended by officials of Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL) and Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC), he said low gas pressure and prolonged outages were unacceptable under any circumstances in extreme cold. He directed the authorities to adopt immediate and measures to ensure an uninterrupted supply and safeguard public welfare.

The meeting, which was also attended by members of the Balochistan Assembly, discussed in detail complaints regarding prolonged outages, reduced pressure and non-availability of gas in several areas.

The chief minister voiced concern over recent gas-related incidents and directed the authorities concerned to strengthen safety measures to protect human lives. He said he had formally conveyed the issue to the prime minister through an official letter, noting that Sui, which supplies gas to the entire country, continued to face acute shortages, forcing families to rely on firewood even today.

53 Chagai students get scholarships

By Muhammad Akbar Notezai

QUETTA: A total of 53 outstanding students from Chagai district, including 19 women, were on Thursday awarded scholarships by Reko Diq Mining Company. The scholarship award ceremony was held in Nokkundi.

The recipients of the scholarship will attend a six-month Foundation Programme at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Sukkur.

Parents, community elders and local stakeholders attended the ceremony to celebrate the students' achievement.

Speaking on the occasion, RDMC head of sustainability Ashley Price said the company's approach to sustainability is centred on people.

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